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ABSTRACT

Solomon Henry Clark's 1895 address entitled "The New Elocution," focused on the denigration of elocution as an academic discipline, its fall from favor with universities, and the worn, tired, and reductive methods of teaching which he saw around him. Clark's vision--as he stated in his 1915 address and book entitled "Interpretation of the Printed Page"--was to transform elocution into a method of teaching literature. Nearly 100 years later the field of interpretation has undergone transformations as radical as had elocution at the turn of the century. "Interpretation" is text-centered and has other legitimate definitions which enjoy a greater currency in other disciplines. "Performance Studies" breaks the old, arbitrary, limiting, useless, boundaries between theatre, communications, and interpretation. "Performance Studies" is an umbrella term and embraces all dimensions of theoretical and production work. "Performance Studies"--the new interpretation--capitalizes, promotes, and celebrates the new directions of the field instead of thwarting them. (RAE)

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THE NEW INTERPRETATION:
FROM "INTERPRETATION" TO "PERFORMANCE STUDIES"

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THE NEW INTERPRETATION:

FROM "INTERPRETATION" TO "PERFORMANCE STUDIES"

John S. Gentile

On Tuesday, July 9th, 1895, Solomon Henry Clark delivered an address in the Hall of Philosophy at the Chautauqua Institution in western New York state. The address, entitled "The New Elocution," focused on the denigration of elocution as an academic discipline, its fall from favor with universities, and the worn, tired, and reductive methods of teaching which he saw around him.[1] The time had come, Clark thought, to reassess the field and to move in new directions. Twenty years after his Chautauqua address, Clark's Interpretation of the Printed Page further established the name for "the new elocution" which had already been gaining acceptance among elocutionists by the turn of the century.[2] Clark's vision--as stated in his address and his book--was to transform elocution into a method of teaching literature. The time has come for us now reassess the field of interpretation and consider our new directions.

We are nearly one hundred years removed from Clark and the field of interpretation has undergone transformations as radical as had elocution at the turn of the century. Clark successfully helped move elocution away from the extravagant bombast that plagued the field during its last years and transformed it into a study of literary texts. Here interpretation found its place as an academic discipline

for much of our century. Yet, no vital field of study remains static for long and the field of interpretation has witnessed many important changes since the days of S. H. Clark, particularly within the last decade. These changes reflect a general broadening of the field, a movement beyond traditional concepts of text, audience, performance space, and performer.

While many of the recent changes were not pronounced until the late 1970s and early 1980s, the groundwork for change was established long before. Lee Hudson and Beverly Whitaker Long offer a brief retrospective on the changes in the field during the 1950s and 1960s which moved us toward the present:

> In the 50's interpretation educators voiced dissatisfaction with the terms readings and recitations, and with the lifelfess, unintelligent rendering these descriptors implied. Instead, they developed a fuller conceptualization of interpretation, one that considered performances as critical explorations or textual illuminations of a literary selection. It was a short, but crucial, step to then view the performance itself as a demonstrated act of literary criticism offering unique critical insight. . . . Performance as knowing became the key concept dominating, in one way or another, the contributions made during the 60's. An important transition was just beginning: Presentation, oral reading, representation, expression, recitation, or interpretation was evolving into the fuller concept of performed literature.[3]

The 1950s and 1960s prepared the way for the shift in interpretation towards performance, a movement which gained momentum throughout the 1970s as interest increased in experimental group performance modes and oral and nonfictional texts. Wallace A. Bacon, in his 1975 essay "The Dangerous Shores a Decade Later," recognized the

growing appreciation of the performance act within the discipline of interpretation and condoned its implications:

> Interpretation today seems to be vitally concerned with the nature of the embodiment [of the text], and we are no longer so solely concerned with the nature of the text being embodied. . . . The direction seems to me a healthy sign.[4]

Elizabeth C. Fine and Jean Haskell Speer quoted Bacon's essay in their 1977 monograph "A New Look at Performance" which examined the potentialities for the enrichment and the revitalization of the discipline of interpretation which they saw as already significantly reoriented towards performance:

> The major thrust of teaching and research in interpretation has been text-centered, dealing with literature rather than performance as the most substantive component of the discipline. Recently, however, studies in interpretation increasingly have turned attention to performance process in addition to text.[5]

Other recent publications in interpretation continue to emphasize the fact that we have come a long way from the days of S. H. Clark. The journal of the field is entitled Literature in Performance; a recent textbook is Performing Literature. The nomenclature is important. Neither Clark nor his devout followers would have deigned to use such terminology, being more comfortable with the limitations implied by "interpretive readings."

The new history project, Performance of Literature in Historical Perspectives, is important for reasons beyond its title. Many of the essays included deal with issues far beyond the more narrow concerns of interpretation scholars of the past. As our research interests broaden, so have our classes. New perspectives have

allied our work with the fields of anthropology, sociology, folklore, and linguistics as well as deepening our ties to psychology and theatre. The new alliances have brought a new vitality to our classrooms. The texts which we study have changed. As well as focusing on the traditional literary genres of poetry, prose fiction, and drama, we are also strongly interested in the performance of nonfictional texts, oral texts, and personal texts. Our methods of presentation have changed to encompass a far broader range of performance styles and genres, including work in performance art.

Where do we go from here? How do we legitimize "the new interpretation"? Clearly our interests will take us further in broadening our base in the study of the performance act but our current name for our field is restrictive. "Interpretation" is text-centered and has other legitimate definitions which enjoy a greater currency in other disciplines. "Oral interpretation" is even more outdated and is an incorrect reflection of our work. We need a name that will include all that we do today and all we can do in the future. "Performance Studies" breaks the old, arbitrary, limiting, useless, boundaries between theatre, communications, and interpretation. "Performance Studies" is an umbrella term and embraces all dimensions of our theoretical and production work. "Performance Studies"--the new interpretation--capitalizes, promotes, and celebrates the new directions of our field instead of thwarting them.

Notes

[1]S. H. Clark, "The New Elocution," Chautauqua Assembly Herald, 29 July 1895, p. 2. Clark delivered this address at the Chautauqua Institution on July 9, 1895. Two years later, Clark delivered a substantially different address at the annual meeting of the National Association of Elocutionists on June 30, 1897. This second address continued Clark's move towards interpretation; it was printed in The Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the National Association of Elocutionists [1897] (New York: NAE, 1898), pp. 66b-84. An abridged version was reprinted in The Study of Oral Interpretation: Theory and Comment, ed. Richard Haas and David A. Williams (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975). pp. 30-42.

[2]The 1897 meeting of the National Association of Elocutionists sponsored sections much like SCA's divisions. For the 1897 proceedings of the Interpretation Section, see "Report of the Proceedings of the Sections," Werner's, (Jan. 1898), pp. 559-74, continued in Werner's, (Feb. 1898), pp. 659-64 or the complete published proceedings cited above. The use of "interpretation" as a name for the field predates the 1915 publication of Clark's Interpretation of the Printed Page (Chicago: Row, Pearson & Co., 1915).

[3]Lee Hudson and Beverly Whitaker Long, "Teaching Interpretation in the 80's," Education in the 80's: Speech Communication, ed. Gustav W. Friedrich (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1981), p. 89.

[4]Wallace A. Bacon, "The Dangerous Shores a Decade Later," in Haas and Williams, p. 227.

[5]Elizabeth C. Fine and Jean Haskell Speer, "A New Look at Performance," Communication Monographs, 44 (Nov. 1977), p. 374.